

The American Taboo on Socialism

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Socialism arose in Europe as a critique of industrial society early in the 19th century. A significant socialist movement exists in almost every industrial nation in the world, often going back a century or more. Socialism as an ideology is important in most of the nonindustrial nations as well. Among the major industrial nations, only America has no significant socialist movement. Although socialism was introduced to America early in its history, there is only a fragmentary socialist tradition here. The criticism of capitalism, vigorous in most industrial nations, has been faint and fitful.

Why is it that socialism has been taboo, and capitalism sacrosanct? Is it because capitalism has "worked" in America? Is it because capitalism's beneficiaries have outnumbered its victims? Perhaps though it has worked for some groups better than for others and in some periods better than in others. And it is not obvious that capitalism has worked so much better here than in many other countries where it has met a strenuous opposition. Is the apparent taboo on socialism due to the enormous repressive power of American capitalism, its power to throttle effective criticism? Again there is some truth to such an assertion. There is an old tradition of antiradical violence in America and there have been periods, such as the First World War and its immediate aftermath and the McCarthy period after the Second World War, when radical thought of all varieties has been severely persecuted. But on the whole, socialist organization has been legal in America and socialist thought uncensored. American socialists have never faced the mass arrests

and total prohibition on socialist publications that, for example, Japanese socialists have, yet socialism in Japan remains a far more vital movement than in America. The weakness of a critical socialist tradition in America cannot be explained altogether by the success of capitalism or the repression of socialism but is in part due to those features of American culture and American myth that we have been examining.¹

2.

The word “socialism” was coined in France at about the same time as the word “individualism.” The two words arrived on these shores in the years between 1820 and 1840 as contrast terms for one another. In Europe individualism carried a negative implication so that socialism had, initially at least, a rather positive connotation.² But individualism resonated to so much that was latent in American ideology that it rapidly became the positive term. Socialism, its opposite, could only be evaluated negatively. Emerson expressed the national mood in 1847 when he said, “Individualism has never been tried,” and went on to decry the vogue that socialism was enjoying just when it seemed that at last individualism might have a real chance. His position had already been worked out in 1840 when, in criticizing the communitarian experience at Brook Farm, he said, “I do not wish to remove from my present prison to a prison a little larger. I wish to break all prisons.”³ It should be noted that Emerson was not glorifying something that already existed in America in contrast to socialism. He was certainly not glorifying capitalism, for which the name and the concept as yet scarcely existed. He was expressing his hope for the appearance of a utopian individualism that would be fulfillment of Protestant volunteerism and Jeffersonian democracy. In a society characterized by such utopian individualism, government would be reduced to those few functions that neighbors could voluntarily agree to without infringing on the full play of individual autonomy.

It should be obvious that such a conception of individualism would not be easy to reconcile with the realities of a society dominated by industrial capitalism. Emerson was ambivalent toward the emerging symptoms of such an economic order, and Thoreau was implacably hostile to them. The ideological issue, individualism vs. socialism, came to a head well before industrial capitalism could even be clearly discerned in America, which was not until after the Civil War. The general rejection of socialism in America by the 1850s, after an earlier flurry of interest, is to be explained far more by the victory of the ideology of individualism than as a choice between alternate ways to order a new industrial economy whose outlines were as yet hardly discernable.

When capitalism in America did become ideologically self-conscious, it took shelter under the established categories of individualism, however incongruous that would turn out to be. In the 20th century, “free enterprise,” with its connotation of early entrepreneurial capitalism easily reconciled with individualism, became the slogan of the giant corporate bureaucracy that was the reality of late capitalism. The link between the most basic national values and the alleged characteristics of our economy are clearly spelled out in a 1946 statement by the National Association of Manufacturers in a book entitled *The American Individual Enterprise System*:

At the threshold of our national existence we solemnly asserted “the unalienable right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness”; we fought the Revolutionary War for that right, and adopted a Constitution to guarantee and propagate it. We became a nation of free men not serving political masters but ourselves, free to pursue our happiness without interference from the state, with the greatest liberty of individual action ever known to man. Individuals, conscious of unbounded opportunity, inflamed by the love of achievement, inspired by the hope of profit, ambitious of the comfort, power and influence that wealth brings, turned with ...

vigor to producing and offering goods and services in freely competitive markets. The individual wanted little from the government beyond police protection while he confidently worked out his own destiny. ... Our “private enterprise system and our American form of government are inseparable and there can be no compromise between a free economy and a governmentally dictated economy without endangering our political as well as our economic freedom.”⁴

Most of the founding fathers would not have waxed quite as warm about the “hope of profit” and the ambitions for “the comfort, power and influence that wealth brings,” as did the National Association of Manufacturers. But what is striking in the statement is the assertion of individual freedom against the interference of a hierarchical, bureaucratic state, while such freedom is not asserted against the interference of vast hierarchical, bureaucratic corporations, corporations that operate largely outside the normal democratic political process and are under even less popular restraint than state power.

3.

In the third chapter I suggested that there is far more tension between basic American values and the capitalist economic system than is usually assumed. Much as the Puritans encouraged work in a calling, they were always aware of the dangers of making wealth and power into ends in themselves, dangers not only to one’s eternal salvation but also the coherence of the community. But in the 17th and 18th centuries, and even well into the 19th, such matters could be treated largely at the level of individual morality. With the emergence of large-scale industry in the mid-19th century the social and political implications of capitalist organization became manifest, though even today Americans

tend to treat social problems as problems of personal morality. But from early times there have been a few who have shown a sharp social perception.

Already in 1781 Thomas Jefferson in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* made an analysis of the relation between economic and political life that is usually placed under the rubric of agrarianism but is considerably broader in its implication:

Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts He has made His peculiar deposit of substantial and genuine virtue. It is the focus in which he keeps alive that sacred fire, which otherwise might escape from the face of the earth. Corruption of morals in the mass of cultivators is a phenomenon of which no age nor nation has furnished an example. It is the mark set on those, who, not looking up to heaven, to their own soil and industry, as does the husbandman, for their subsistence, depend for it on casualties and caprice of customers. Dependence begets subservience and venality, suffocates the germ of virtue, and prepares fit tools for the design of ambition. This, the natural progress and consequence of the arts, has sometime perhaps been retarded by accidental circumstances; but, generally speaking, the proportion which the aggregate of the other classes of citizens bears in any State to that of its husbandmen, is the proportion of its unsound to its healthy parts and is a good enough barometer whereby to measure its degree of corruption. While we have land to labor then, let us never wish to see our citizens occupied at a work-bench, or twirling a distaff. Carpenters, masons, smiths, are wanting in husbandry; but, for the general operations of manufacture, let our workshops remain in Europe. It is better to carry provisions and materials to workmen there, than bring them to

the provisions and materials, and with them their manners and principles. The loss by the transportation of commodities across the Atlantic will be made up in happiness and permanence of government. The mobs of great cities add just so much to the human body. It is the manners and spirit of a people which preserve a republic in vigor. A degeneracy in these is a canker which soon eats to the heart of its laws and constitution.⁵

There is a notable absence of the glorification of wealth, which contrasts sharply with the National Association of Manufacturers' statement. Jefferson is willing to sustain a relative poverty to gain other ends. His glorification of farmers was not based on any mystique of the soil as such. It is their independence, their lack of subservience, that sets them above merchants and artisans who are dependent on customers for their living. Jefferson believed the republic depended on the participation of autonomous individuals, each capable of making up his own mind and carrying his own responsibility. Every citizen, ideally, would be a "participator in government" and farmers were best suited to that role. By 1816, 30 years after *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson had changed his mind and concluded that manufacturers were necessary for national survival in a period of great international disturbance. But, more concerned than ever with democratic participation, in that year he insistently put forward his proposals for a ward system. The ward was to be a level of government below the county that would involve the active participation of everyone in what he referred to as "elementary republics." He was deeply suspicious of any system that totally delegated political responsibility. He did not lose his original suspicion of manufacturing nor was he sanguine about the future of democracy in America should large sectors of the population become politically and economically de-

pendent. In his correlative stress on individual autonomy and genuine political community, including on its lowest level every individual as an active participator, Jefferson was still holding together the two sides of the American ideal, the individual and the social, that would increasingly come apart in the century after his death.

Orestes A. Brownson, the transcendentalist Unitarian who would later become America's leading 19th-century Catholic thinker, was perhaps the shrewdest social analyst in the period before the Civil War. Rejecting both utopian socialism and utopian individualism, he opted for a balance in the tradition of American thought that went back to John Winthrop. "Community," he said, "without individuality is *tyranny*, the fruits of which are oppression, degradation and immobility, the synonym of death. Individuality without community is *individualism*, the fruits of which are dissolution, isolation, selfishness, disorder, anarchy, confusion, war.... What we need, then is ... communalism and individuality harmonized ... atoned."⁶ Writing in 1840 he saw the greatest threat to that proper balance coming not from socialism but from capitalism. In a famous essay entitled "The Laboring Classes" he depicted in stark outline what the advance of industrialism was doing to American democracy. He deplored the increasing division of Americans into rich and poor and predicted the arrival of that "most dreaded of all wars, the war of the poor against the rich."⁷

Like Jefferson, Brownson argued that democratic government depends on an essential equality of social position. But the common factory laborer could never hope to exercise the same political influence as the mill owner. The dependency that Jefferson had deplored in merchants and artisans Brownson saw as ten times worse among wage laborers. Brownson, writing before Karl Marx had penned a single of his famous lines,

argued that wage labor is essentially a form a slavery. “Wages,” he said in the 1940 article, “is a cunning device of the devil, for the benefit of tender consciences, who retain all the advantages of the slave system, without the expense, trouble, and odium of being slave-owners.”⁸ He even echoed the argument that some of the Southern apologists used for very different purposes; namely that the slave is in some degree better off than the factory worker since he never faces the uncertainties of unemployment or the pangs of actual physical want that afflict the latter.

Brownson’s solution was thoroughly within the Jeffersonian tradition. He wished to build into the economy conditions that emancipate the workingman from his wage slavery so that “by the time he is of a proper age to settle in life, he shall have accumulated enough to be an independent laborer on his own capital – on his own farm or in his own shop.”⁹ In order to ensure the equality of opportunity (“not equal wealth, but equal chances to wealth”¹⁰) that is essential in a democracy, he proposed to abolish inheritance, for he saw that without that measure all talk of equality of opportunity is essentially hollow. What Brownson did not see – what in 1840 was still far from obvious – was that a modern economy could not operate on the basis of small farms and shops, that it had an inherent drive toward a scale that was simply irreconcilable with the traditional American stress on every man his own master. The curious thing is that Americans have never given up that ideological commitment even when it has become almost totally remote from social and economic reality.

Walt Whitman was a far less acute social analyst than Brownson and in many of his social views reflected his environment. It is therefore interesting to find him in the 1880s saying, at the very moment that the giant corporate trusts were forming: “I look

forward to a world of small owners.... The creation of a large, independent, democratic class of small owners is the main thing.”¹¹ He called for the production and perennial establishment of millions of comfortable city homesteads and moderate sized farms, healthy and independent, single separate ownership, fee simple, life in them complete but cheap, within reach of all.”¹² This, it should be noted, is not the dream of wealth, power, and influence. It is the late 19th-century version of the old Puritan republican dream of a participatory democracy. And Whitman’s gnawing fear was expressed in imagery almost identical with that of Jefferson: “If the United States, like the countries of the Old World, are also to grow vast crops of poor, desperate, dissatisfied, nomadic, miserably-waged populations, such as we see looming upon us of late years – steadily, even if slowly, eating into them like a cancer of lungs or stomach – then our republican experiment, notwithstanding all its surface successes, is at heart an unhealthy failure.”¹³

In spite of a long series of struggles to protect and expand the role of the independent producer in America, struggles led by loco-foco Democrats, free-soil Republicans, populists, progressives, and New Dealers, and in spite of specific legislative programs – the dismantling of the United States Bank, the Homestead Act, the antitrust laws, the federal loan programs for farmers and small businessmen – the concentration and bureaucratization of the economy has not been halted or reversed nor have the “vast crops of poor, desperate, dissatisfied, nomadic” and “miserably-waged” been diminished. The emergence of labor unionization, a degree of governmental regulation in many industries, social security, and the welfare system have kept the worst consequences of the profound disparities in the economic system, the consequences feared by Jefferson, Brownson, and Whitman, from appearing with all their potential virulence. But they have not altered the

fundamental fact that the economic system of late industrial America cannot be reconciled with the fundamental American ideology of economic independence as the basis of political order. That ideology we have never abandoned though it has described our social reality less accurately with every passing decade.

4.

If there is a profound disparity between the present American economic system and basic American values, and if many Americans have so argued, then it is all the more surprising that some version of socialism, as the main alternative to capitalist economic organization in the modern world, has not found favor in the United States. Socialism has often seemed to compound the evil that is contained in capitalism. Rather than releasing the autonomous individual and placing him in a context of genuine participatory community, socialism has been seen as a system that crushes the individual under a centralized bureaucratic structure even more effectively than corporate capitalism. With the example of state socialism in the Soviet Union since 1917, that argument has been especially hard to refute. But there are concepts of socialism and socialist movements in the world that reject the Soviet model. The American aversion to socialism goes deeper than rational argument. It is worth trying to understand the basis of that aversion, for such an understanding will instruct us about some aspects of the American soul.

In 1887, Edward Bellamy's utopian novel *Looking Backward* described a society in which all the economic disturbances of his day had been overcome. In Bellamy's ideal society everyone served in the highly centralized economy for a maximum of 22 years and then enjoyed a life of leisure and self-expression on a fixed and equal income. Bel-

lamy's book started a not inconsiderable movement of what came to be known as "Nationalist" clubs. In 1888 Bellamy explained why he avoided the term socialist:

In the radicalness of the opinions I have expressed I may seem to out socialize the socialists, yet the word socialist is one I could never well stomach. It smells to the average American of petroleum, suggests the red flag and all manner of sexual novelties, and an abusive tone about God and religion.... Whatever German and French reformers may choose to call themselves, socialist is not a good name for a party to succeed with in America.¹⁴

In his very choice of the name "nationalist" Bellamy gave an indication of another feature of socialism that he was trying to disavow, namely that it is a foreign ideology, un-American.

It is true that socialism arrived in the United States in the early 19th century as a revolutionary messianic ideology of French origin. As such it inevitably was seen as a rival and possibly a danger to America's own revolutionary messianic ideology. This rival ideology carried its own myth of origin quite different from ours. Early in the history of the new nation there had been a deep revulsion against the excesses of the French Revolution and a tendency to contrast it with the moderate and humane character of the American Revolution. Such a contrast was stated most vigorously by the early Federalists but was in some form or other accepted by Jeffersonian Democrats as well. How vivid was the memory of the French Revolution and how easily revolutionary socialism was identified with it is indicated by the fact that even Brownson's quite explicitly unsocialist proposals of 1840 earned for him the soubriquet of "Jacobin" or "the American Robespierre." The fact that later socialist ideologists in America were very frequently immigrants only added to the foreign image.

“Revolutionary” could never be an entirely negative attribute in America and if that were the only problem with socialism it is possible that it might have been domesticated. More serious is what Bellamy referred to as its “abusive tone about God and religion,” namely the undeniable atheism and materialism that characterized not all kinds of socialism but particularly the most influential strand, Marxism. This was, and I suggest even now remains, a grave and serious stumbling block. In Europe not only many of the intellectuals but the mass of the workers tended to be disaffected with religion and alienated from the church in the 19th century, but not in America. Even though American intellectuals were ambivalent about the Protestant tradition, they showed an inveterate idealism to which the stress on material motivation of many socialists could only be abhorrent. Reacting against capitalist materialism such men were not apt to be attracted to socialist materialism. Indeed one may wonder whether, if Karl Marx had studied a little less at the feet of David Ricardo and a little more at the feet of William Blake, he might not have had a far more powerful impact on English-speaking intellectuals. But whatever was the case with the subtleties of the intellectuals, to the average American worker an ideology that claimed to be explicitly atheistic could only be repulsive.

Though “revolutionary” and “atheistic” would continue to be negative terms used to characterize socialism, it was the attribute of collectivism or statism, in contrast to allegedly American individualism, that would be the central negative image. This image, however, involved a double distortion. For one thing, there were religious, democratic, and humanistic forms of socialism emphasizing individual dignity that Americans almost entirely failed to see or appreciate. For another the American tradition itself was not one-sidedly individualistic but always involved a balance of concern between the individual and his community. When the functions of political

community were degraded to a matter of mere “police protection,” both the tradition of the covenant community and of constitutional republicanism were subverted.

Inevitably when a dichotomy becomes magnified in such a way that both sides of it are distorted, one begins to suspect the presence of the psychological mechanism of projection. The “rugged individualist” decrying every form of collectivism, above all atheistic communism, as the very embodiment of evil, may be projecting his own dependency needs and needs for community, ruthlessly repressed and denied in himself, onto his alleged enemies. Even granted the unspeakable crimes committed in the 20th century by Communist nations (a close inspection of the history of the century, however, would disclose that such societies have had no monopoly on unspeakable crimes) the morbid anti-Communism of the American right, and the tendency to assimilate every kind of socialist or even liberal position to that of Communism, indicates, I believe, some serious failure to come to terms with the balance between dependence and independence, solidarity and autonomy, that are part of any mature personality or society. This morbid obsession may be a symptom then, not of the genuine Americanism that it claims, but of its distortion and pathology.

5.

A quick look at those brief moments in American history when socialism did strike a response tends to confirm the above analysis of the reasons for its more usual unpopularity. The varieties of socialism that attracted a flurry of interest in the second quarter of the 19th century, namely the theories of Robert Owen and Charles Fourier, were not revolutionary in any violent sense; they were easily reconciled with religious and idealistic philosophies; and they each gave a high consideration to individual autonomy. A passage from Henry James, Sr., father of Henry and William James, gives us the flavor of a socialism that was, for a moment at least completely

indigenized. James was a Swedenborgian transcendentalist and a Fourier socialist. On the question of property James wrote in the early 1850s:

Thus Socialism condemns, after a certain stage of human progress, the institution of limited property. It demands for man an infinite property, that is to say a property in universal nature and in all the affections and thoughts of humanity. It is silly to charge it with a tendency to destroy property. It aims indeed to destroy all merely limited and conventional property, all such property as is held not by any inward fitness of the subject, but merely by external police or convention; but it aims to destroy even this property only in the pacific way of superseding it, that is, by giving the subject possession of the whole earth, or a property commensurate with his inward and essential finitude.¹⁵

In the first summer of the Civil War James was asked to give the Fourth of July address at Newport, Rhode Island. At that critical moment in history he chose to express his fundamental Americanism in socialist form:

I never felt proud of my country for what many seem to consider her prime distinction, namely, her ability to foster the rapid accumulation of private wealth. It does not seem to me a particularly creditable thing, that a greater number of people annually grow richer under our institutions than they do anywhere else....

No; what makes one's pulse to bound when he remembers his home under foreign skies, is never the rich man, nor the learned man, nor the distinguished man of any sort who illustrates its history, for in all these petty products almost every country may favorably, at all events tediously, compete with our own; but it

is all simply the abstract manhood itself of the country, man himself unqualified by convention, the man to whom all these conventional men have been simply introductory, the man who – let me say it – for the first time in human history finding himself in his own right the peer of every other man, spontaneously aspires and attains to a far freer and profounder culture of his nature than has yet illustrated humanity....

The letter kills, the spirit alone gives life; and it is exclusively to this undeniable spiritual difference between Europe and America, as organized and expressed in our own constitutional polity, that all our formal differences are owing. Our very Constitution binds us, that is to say, the very breath of our political nostrils binds us, to disown all distinctions among men, to disregard persons, to disallow privilege the most established and sacred, to legislate only for the common good, no longer for those accidents of birth or wealth or culture which spiritually individualize man from his kind, but only for those great common features of social want and dependence which naturally unite him with his kind, and inexorably demand the organization of such unity.... The sentiment of human unity, of the sole original sacredness of man and the purely derivative sanctity of persons, no matter who they are, is what we are born to, and what we must not fail to assert with an emphasis and good-will which may, if need be, make the world resound. For it is our very life, the absolute breath of our nostrils, which alone qualifies us to exist.¹⁶

During the 1870s and 1880s the communitarian socialism of the period before the Civil War was almost forgotten and most Americans writing on the subject were pointing with alarm

to the possibility of class warfare and destructive revolution that European socialism would bring to America. Henry Ward Beecher saw socialism “drifting in from the eastern ocean like a Newfoundland fog.”¹⁷ But in fact virtually the only socialists active in America in those years were a small group of German immigrants who managed to strike remarkably little response. As Albert Fried has suggested, one of the reasons that Marxian socialism preached by the Germans was so ineffective is that it seemed to most Americans “to lack a moral dimension.”¹⁸ Only gradually when it became naturalized in native and moralistic form did it, in the first decade and a half of the 20th century in the guise of the Socialist Party of America, become a significant force on the American scene. Though its electoral successes were widespread at the local and state level the success of the early Socialist Party as a movement with mass appeal was very much linked to the personality of Eugene V. Debs who polled nearly a million votes in the presidential campaign of 1912. Ralph Gabriel characterizes Debs in a way that neatly suggests his appeal: “Debs, a perennial candidate for president, was primarily an evangelist of a humanitarian socialist gospel that emphasized the greed of the rich and the sufferings of the poor.”¹⁹ Debs was a Marxist of sorts but he was far more an orator than a theoretician. He presented socialism in a very American rhetoric, full of biblical imagery and steeped in American history. He touched the old springs of Protestant messianism, for example, when he said:

The workers are the saviors of society; the redeemers of the race; and when they have fulfilled their great historic mission, men and women can walk the highlands and enjoy the vision of a land without masters and without slaves, a land regenerated and resplendent in the triumph of freedom and civilization.²⁰

He pitched his appeal on a high moral level, always eschewing violence and hatred though himself not infrequently the subject of violence and hatred. “There is no room in our hearts,” he said, “for hatred, except for the system....”²¹ And again:

Did the socialist party have no higher political ideal than the victory of one class over another it would not be worthy of a moment’s support from any right-thinking individual. It would, indeed, be impossible for the party to gain any considerable strength or prestige. It is the great moral worth of its ideals that attracts adherents to the Socialist movement even from the ranks of the capitalist class, and holds them to their allegiance with an enthusiasm that suggests a close parallel with the early days of Christianity....”²²

Such words may appear naïve to an orthodox Marxist but they had far more persuasive power in the American context than any orthodox Marxist ever had.

6.

The Socialist Party did not survive World War I as an effective political force. Its collapse is only the most dramatic of the many breaks in continuity that mark the history of socialism in America. This is certainly not the place to answer the vexing problem of what went wrong. We can only offer a few reflections. The World War and the Russian Revolution each dealt the movement a heavy blow. The party’s opposition to the war alienated the Anglo-American intellectuals who had given it much of its visibility. Debs consistently opposed the war but had for some time ceased to be more than an eloquent spokesman for the movement.²³ He was alienated by the factional politics that plagued the party.

The Russian Revolution symbolically linked socialism with foreign revolutionaries in American eyes. By 1920 the Socialist Party and the incipient Communist Party were much more

exclusively ethnic organizations than the pre-war Socialist Party had ever been. This development made especially visible the obstacles that America's cultural and ethnic divisions have placed in the way of effective opposition movements. The alliance between intellectuals and workers that seems so essential for a successful socialist movement was particularly hard to sustain where class differences were compounded by ethnic and racial differences. Critical Anglo-American intellectuals could not easily turn to nor be accepted by other racial and ethnic groups. Ethnic intellectuals were often seduced into general American culture, leaving behind the problems of their own more unfortunate compatriots. As a result the socialist education movements that were effective among European workers were much less successful here and labor organizations limited their goals to short-run economic benefits. In addition the dominant secularism of many of the immigrant socialist intellectuals did not sit well with the evangelical idealistic socialism of the old Americans.

The American Communist party never generated the broad popular support that the old Socialist party had. It always suffered from the suspicion of foreign control. In the 1930s and early 1940s it had selective appeal to many Americans, particularly to intellectuals who adopted their political stance for essentially idealistic reasons and managed to hide from themselves the realities of Stalinism. The collapse of the Communist party, due to inner disaffection and outer persecution after World War II, was another significant break in continuity. During the 1960s several varieties of socialist ideology emerged under the general rubric of the New Left. During the course of the decade the militancy of its rhetoric rose as its mass appeal correlatively declined but as is usual in the history of American socialism it was based far more on idealistic zeal than on class interest. The failure of both the Communist party and the New Left to link their socialism to any genuinely American pattern of values and attitudes, and the use of foreign catego-

ries to analyze American society, is typical of all but a few moments in the history of American socialism. That failure guarantees isolation and ineffectiveness even though the economic institutions of the country and its social and cultural life cry out for critical inspection from a radical perspective.

7.

We must now consider the ways in which the system of corporate industry that has grown up in the last century undermines essential American values and constitutional order. Both the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution contain an implicit guarantee of the natural right to property, and that right is explicitly stated in the great 14th Amendment to the Constitution. As we have seen, private productive property was held to be the essential economic base of a free citizenry by most social analysts of the early republic. The constitutional guarantee of the right to property was long used as a legal hedge to defend corporate industrial capitalism from government regulation. But the fact remains that the great expropriator of private property in America has not been the state but corporate capitalism. From a nation of individual property holders – farmers, artisans, and merchants – we have become a nation of bureaucratic wage earners, dependent on vast institutional structures that we do not control. The last bastion of American economic autonomy, the family farm, has long been on the decline. In a great agricultural state like California the individual farmer can barely survive in the face of ever-expanding corporate agriculture, a corporate agriculture which, in the form of tax benefits, subsidized water supplies, and other governmental aid, receives far more support from the state than the autonomous farmer ever did. What is finally evident in agriculture has long been true in the rest of the economy. It is certain that such corporate management of the economy has made us richer than

when the economy was largely in individual hands. But has it not, as Jefferson and Brownson and Whitman feared, undermined the moral basis of our republican institutions?

Correlative with the decline in private property, at least private property as the founding fathers knew it and meant it, has come the great concentration of political power in corporate hands, power that is not easily brought to account by any form of democratic process. The copper strip mining that threatens to physically destroy the city of Butte, Montana, is paralleled by even the more destructive social strip mining that is overtaking a city like San Francisco. The sudden uncontrolled proliferation of high rise office buildings, many of them incredibly ugly and completely out of proportion to the rest of the city, brings in its wake devastating social and economic consequences. The city as an organic balance of economic and residential areas is disrupted. Families flee to the suburbs as residential taxes rise to pay for the services that must now be supplied to commuters. Poverty and crime fill the fringes of the expanding office district. The sterile tiers of vast office buildings replace the tangled cluttered life of Chinatown and other ethnic communities. Opposition is not lacking, but these buildings are sponsored by such giants as Bank of America and United States Steel. The immense wealth and power of these corporations entirely outweigh the interests of the people of San Francisco, and one of America's few beautiful cities slides ever closer to the ugliness, chaos, and despair of the ravaged cities of the East.

Decisions that in their general implications are profoundly political are made on the basis of economic considerations and decided by the balance of private economic power. Private profit outweighs public good. Nothing in the current American institutional order is capable of placing proper restraints on such tendencies. Labor unions often cooperate with business as in San Francisco where the building trades unions campaigned against the effort to establish a citywide height limitation. Regulatory agencies have a tendency to sink into lethargy as their funds prove

inadequate to the job they are expected to do, or they turn out to be staffed by men drawn from the very industries they are ostensibly to regulate. These are not moral failings of the men involved; they are the inevitable outcome when private aggregations of power have obligations only to making a profit and not to the general welfare. And, whatever may have been the case earlier in American history, it is becoming clear that the tyranny of profit has set us on a most dangerous course. Our economy can only survive through constant expansion, whatever the ecological and social consequences of that expansion. Thus in any economic crisis it is not possible to say: we are rich enough, we are wasting resources enough, let us consider the conserving of resources, more adequate repair of present equipment, improved quality but reduced quantity in our style of life. No; the economy is like a heroin addict; only another shot of the very profit narcotic that creates a recession will get us out of it. But how many more belts of uncontrolled economic expansion will we be able to absorb before the social and ecological consequences totally undermine our democratic society, not to speak of our physical health?

Nor can we afford to overlook what our present form of economy is doing to public morals and republican virtue. We have spoken before of the balance between impulse and control, liberation and institutionalized liberty, as being essential to a free society. But we have, in advertising, one of the central institutions of our economy, an institution upon which we spend more than we do on all our educational institutions combined, and far more than we spend on our churches, and which systematically and incessantly works to undermine that balance. A century ago advertising as an institution scarcely existed. Today the average American has seen 350,000 television commercials before he graduates from high school. As David Potter has written:

... the traditional institutions have tried to improve man and to develop in him qualities of social value, though, of course, these values have not always been

broadly conceived. The church has sought to inculcate virtue and consideration of others – the golden rule; the schools have made it their business to stimulate ability and to impart skills....

In contrast with these, advertising has in its dynamics no motivation to seek the improvement of the individual or to impart qualities of social usefulness, unless conformity to material values may be so characterized.... What is basic is that advertising, as such, with all its vast power to influence values and conduct, cannot ever lose sight of the fact that it ultimately regards man as a consumer and defines its own mission as one of stimulating him to consume or to desire to consume.²⁴

That happiness is to be obtained through limitless material acquisition is denied by every religion and philosophy known to man but is preached incessantly by every American television set. What this does to the large portion of our population who have the resources to engage in the getting game is bad enough. What it does to millions who are marginal to our economy and can participate only vicariously in the great cornucopia is grim indeed, grim in inner disappointment and frustration, grim in the possibility of unrestrained violence. Few societies could imagine themselves surviving very long when one of their central institutions was advocating unrestrained greed. Are we so different from all other human societies?

But the blighting effect of advertising, itself the necessary child of the profit drive of corporate capitalism, goes beyond its own message to what it does to the culture, or what passes as such, for which it pays. Advertising money goes to whatever has the widest and most emotionally powerful appeal, to television rather than to magazines, and to those television programs that cater to unrestrained violence and insinuating sexuality rather than those that make any demand

on the mature intellect or moral sensitivity. Thus the present American economic system, through one of its chief institutions, seems to be dedicated to the propagation of every one of the classic vices of mankind and to the relentless undermining of the values and virtues upon which this nation is built.

And what are the benefits that we are supposed have gained from this insatiable economic system? Prosperity, abundance, wealth. Even leaving aside the question of the uneven distribution of this wealth we may still raise the question as to whether wealthy is the unalloyed good or poverty the unalloyed evil that American society at present believes them to be. We tend to define poverty as a situation of material deficit. That, however, outside the significant but still quite small percentage of the population that is genuinely hungry, is not the real reason that poverty is unbearable. Poverty is a social and political status involving vulnerability to political and even police intervention in one's life and the lack of any effective power to assert one's wishes and needs. Poverty is bad mainly because it is a condition of powerlessness, not because, in America at least, it involves stark material want. When poverty is chosen, when it is a voluntary status, undertaken for some moral or religious end, it is often a state of joy rather than of suffering, as in the case of Thoreau at Walden, the Peace Corp worker, or the inhabitant of a rural commune. Where it does not have the meaning of political vulnerability and defenselessness, a life of material simplicity can be deeply rewarding and is increasingly being chosen by America's young. There is every reason to believe that a life of material austerity, of pride and pleasure in the quality of workmanship rather than in the amount consumed, a life lived in a warm and supportive community, would far healthier for our society, ecologically and sociologically, than our present dominant pattern of ever-accelerating consumption. But our economy could not survive a mass turn to voluntary poverty, however much our republican morality might be improved by such a

turn, and our economy exerts all of its enormous power to prevent such a turn. I submit that of the several critical features of our present social situation that leads me to call it America's third time of trial this is the most decisive.

I do not know whether some sort of decentralized democratic socialism can supply a healthier economic base for the kind of change that seems necessary if we are to continue as a society of free men and women. I suspect that it can. I see no advantage in a precipitate shift from a bad system to one that we are not reasonably assured will not after all be worse. But it is time, it seems to me, for those who see the serious pass to which our society has come, and the major contribution our present economic system has made to our present troubles, to put aside the bailing wire and paper clips of liberal tinkering and consider whether much more drastic changes may be needed. I am sure that the socialism being preached by the radical sectarians of the far left, modeled on the ideas of Fidel Castro or the thought of Mao Tse-tung, leaders of two societies about as different from the United States as it is possible to be, is not the answer. But I am also convinced that serious men, responsible men, concerned with the survival of our society in some form of recognizable continuity with its past, must with all due care and deliberation, turn now to the social and political drawing boards in order to draw up proposals of far-reaching scope to meet the far-reaching problems in which we are embroiled. I suspect that our difficulties will soon become so critical that even respected statesmen will disregard the taboos of the past and begin talking about and helping to delineate a distinctively American socialism.

With Henry James, Sr. we can perhaps look forward to the day when what he called "limited property" is superseded and we come into our inheritance of the "whole earth." Emerson stated the issue clearly when he wrote:

As long as our civilization is essentially one of property, of fences, of exclusiveness, it will be mocked by delusions. Our riches will leave us sick; there will be bitterness in our laughter, and our wine will burn our mouth. Only that good profits which we can taste with all doors open, and which serves all men.²⁵

Not that openness will be easy to attain. There are enormous concentrations of economic, political, and technological power that will react harshly to any challenge. Even when those who profit from the present economic organization of American society have lost confidence in their own vision, even when they see ever more clearly the catastrophe that the single-minded pursuit of wealth and power is creating, they will not easily relinquish their power. Not only clear rational alternatives to the present irrational economic order are needed; political organization, whether in an old structure like the Democratic party or in some new structure, will be needed. And that organization, that movement, must be broad enough and deep enough to engage millions of Americans from a variety of cultural backgrounds at the deepest level of their personality. For that the socialist vision must be linked once again, as it was for Henry James, Sr. and Eugene Debs, with a vision that is moral and religious as well as political. We now turn to a consideration of the resources for the renewal of the imagination in America that is the necessary precondition and accompaniment to any social transformation.

Notes

¹ A new and very useful symposium on the weakness of American socialism has recently been published: John H.M. Laslett and Seymour Martin Lipset, *Failure of a Dream? Essays in the History of American Socialism*, Doubleday Anchor, 1974. In spite of the richness of this collection of previously published and new materials, the religious and cultural aspects of the problem are treated quite tangentially.

² Yehoshua Arieli traces the origin of the terms "individualism" and "socialism" to the Saint-Simonians in early 19th-century France. He writes, "The term 'individualism' was coined by the Saint-Simonians to characterize the condition of men in nineteenth-century society – their uprootedness, their lack of ideals and common beliefs, their fragmentation, and their ruthless competitive and exploitative attitudes which evolved from this legitimized anarchy." *Individualism and Nationalism in American Ideology*, Penguin Books, 1966, p. 207. "Socialism" was a

contrast term to “individualism” understood in that sense. See Chapter 10 of Arieli’s book entitled *Individualism and Socialism: The Birth of Two New Concepts*.

³ Arieli, *op. cit.*, p. 273.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 332.

⁵ Saul K. Padover (ed.), *The Complete Jefferson*, Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1943, pp. 678-679.

⁶ Arieli, *op. cit.*, p. 236.

⁷ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *Orestes A. Brownson*, Little, Brown, 1939, p. 90.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

¹¹ Newton Arvin, *Whitman*, Macmillan, 1938, p. 103.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 102.

¹³ *Ibid.* p. 143.

¹⁴ Albert Fried, *Socialism in America*, Anchor, 1970, p. 265.

¹⁵ F.O. Matthiessen (ed.), *The James Family*, Knopf, 1948, p. 53.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 60, 61, 63, 66.

¹⁷ Ralph Henry Gabriel, *op. cit.*, p. 257.

¹⁸ Fried, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

¹⁹ Gabriel, *op. cit.*, p. 358.

²⁰ Jean Y. Tussey (ed.) *Eugene Debs Speaks*, Pathfinder Press, 1970, p. 144.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 264.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 22.

²³ Nick Salvatore, who is writing a dissertation on Debs at Berkeley, has been helpful in my understanding of this and other aspects of Deb’s career.

²⁴ David M. Potter, *People of Plenty*, University of Chicago Press, 1954, pp. 176-177.

²⁵ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Complete Essays and Other Writings*, Modern Library, 1940, p. 520.